



COMMUNICATING DEVELOPMENT

getting the NGO message across

Russ Grayson





Communicating Development Getting the NGO message across

Russ Grayson, 2006



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Author and photos by Russ Grayson

info@pacific-edge.info

www.pacific-edge.info

Design: Fiona Campbell

TerraCircle www.terracircle.org.au

TerraCircle is an international development consultancy working in the South West Pacific and Australia in: food security, livelihood development, training in small scale sustainable agriculture, community health, project management.



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Introduction...

COMMUNICATING DEVELOPMENT was prepared for distribution to Sydney-based international aid and development non-government organisations (NGOs) through the Sydney Network of Small NGOs immediately after the Communicating Development seminar. The author was Projects and Development Education Officer with a member-agency, APACE (Appropriate Technology for Community and Environment).

The seminar was presented by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA - now the Australian Council for International Development - ACFID).

AusAID is part of the Department of Foreign Affairs and administers Australia's overseas aid budget. ACFID is an industry organisation representing many Australian non-government organisations (NGOs).

The seminar

The seminar took place on 1 and 2 July, 1997, at the AusAID premises in Sydney.

Presenters included:

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Foreward

The essential value of effective communication

AS INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY staff we might have capable managers, thorough project planners and practical practitioners... we might have a body of dedicated supporters and we might have clever public relations people who paint a positive impression of the agency and its work in public. But if we don't **communicate** our work those dedicated supporters are likely to trickle away and we are likely to find it difficult to replace them.

It's no secret that there's a great deal of competition for the attention of the publics of developed countries. Numerous organisations seek their generosity in making donations. At the same time, the advertising industry competes for that same money by offering a bewildering array of consumer goods and services.

Even among development and aid agencies there's competition for donations and for a favourable public attitude towards them. Members of small agencies say how difficult they find fundraising when they are forced to compete for the public dollar with the big aid players like World Vision Australia and Care Australia.

The world — a changed place; the messages — still valid

Since the seminar reported in the following pages took place, the world has changed substantially, however the core messages delivered by the presenters remain as valid today as they ever were.

Communication with the public, with government and with partners in aid in developing countries remains as tricky and problematic as it ever was when it comes to long-term development assistance. It is easier, however, when it comes to emergency response, as the Australian public's generosity to the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami proved.

The media — the key player

The popular media — the daily press, radio and television — remain the key influences on how the public perceives both emergencies and long-term development.

What was less apparent when the seminar took place were the opportunities email and the Internet presented for aid and development agencies. What was not even envisioned were the opportunities brought by the diversified online communications formats common today — weblogs, podcasting, video podcasting, SMS alerts and direct organisation-to-individual communications via digital devices packaged into mobile phones.

Communications staff of development agencies have to be media and technology-savvy people today, however technology is only a means of delivering a message. The message, as always, has to be coherent, accurate and has to encourage recipients to take the action suggested by the agency — to change their behaviour in some way.

Presenters at the seminar told the audience that the simple provision of information and education, by themselves, were not enough to change personal behaviour. This understanding now has wider acceptance and approaches such as social marketing have been developed to add behavioural change to information and education.

Aid agency personnel can only benefit by seriously considering the advice in the pages that follow and by reflecting on their own work in light of it.



Opening session

Deborah Stokes, Deputy Director General, AusAID...

NGOs are far more successful than government at community awareness.

Although government and NGOs are not always mutually supportive they have common interests.

Bill Armstrong, President, ACFOA...

The government, private and community sectors should work on aid together. ACFOA supports communication with AusAID.

Community support for the aid programme of between 65 per cent and 70 per cent provides a good start to developing an understanding of the causes of underdevelopment among the community and how it can be tackled through aid.



A different approach to development education — Seed Savers' Network director, Michel Fanton, demonstrates how to winnow seeds.

Familiarising Australians with the everyday practices of people in developing countries increases understanding of how life is lived in them.



Shaping community attitudes

Hugh Mackay, Mackay Research...

Hugh Mackay is a respected Sydney-based social researcher. He is author of a number of books on Australian social attitudes and social change as well as a novelist. Hugh has a regular column in the Sydney Morning Herald.

Hugh started with an assertion based on his social analysis research:

“Something has changed in Australian society during the 1990s”, he said.

He identified these changes as:

- ▶ Australia has become a tougher, rougher place to live
- ▶ society is increasingly tightly regulated
- ▶ there is less volunteering in the community
- ▶ there is less compassion
- ▶ people are less giving.

These changes are due to:

- ▶ the rise of the ‘baby boomer’ generation
- ▶ the user-pays factor
- ▶ the cost cutting mentality.

Rise of the baby boomers

Mackay described them as a “peculiar generation” born into the paradoxical influences of the late-1940s and early 1950s. The baby boomer generation has been shaped by:

- ▶ the post-World War Two economic boom which brought economic growth, near-full employment and the sense that a positive economic outcome was the generation’s birthright
- ▶ the notion that life was destined to be prosperous and “materially rich”
- ▶ the insecurity brought by the Cold War.

These paradoxical influences produced a generation which wanted to claim its perceived dues of comfort and economic birthright quickly because of the insecurity induced by the Cold War. This produced an ethos of instant gratification, materialism and the entitlement to comfort.

- ▶ debt was seen as the means to instant gratification and the generation subsequently developed the worst record for savings
- ▶ the 1960s and 1970s were decades of overexpectation.

Mackay asserted that the baby boomer generation was ill-prepared for their middle years because the Cold War did not become hot and the prosperity foreseen was “a promise that could not be delivered”.

No moral framework has come into existence to deal with the economic, technological and social turbulence of the current period — a period unprecedented in Australian history.



Mackay said:

- ▶ the baby boom generation is seeking the happiness promised during its early years but this has remained undelivered
- ▶ although the generation pioneered changes in the workplace, the family and in gender relations, there is now the perception that something is wrong
- ▶ this has generated talk of traditional values but has not produced any large scale return to past standards; answers have been sought in an inward direction, in personal growth and development and the New Age movement.
- ▶ there is now a sense of moral discontent and a state of uncertainty.

The user pays mindset

The growing practice of charging for what were once free services has brought emotional and cultural effects.

These include:

- ▶ a move away from notions of the 'common good'
- ▶ a move away from community
- ▶ a declining expectation to receive or give freely
- ▶ increasing emphasis on personal rights rather than citizen responsibility
- ▶ notions of value for money including value for the tax dollar.

The emerging user pays mindset that permeates the community leads to the attitude of not paying for what is not used. This, Mackay asserts, is anti-communitarian and has implications for the social spending programmes of government.

The cost cutting mentality

The cost cutting mentality "is an economic dogma with social consequences that will produce discomfort", said Mackay.

The mentality is prevalent in business and government, both of which currently display an obsession with balanced budgets or with surplus budgets. This is why there has been no outcry over the reduction to the overseas aid budget of 0.29 per cent of GDP rather than 0.7 per cent of GDP recommended by the UN.

Reducing the budget is now seen as preferable to increasing it, according to research.

Insecurity

Mackay cited recent research which disclosed that around 32 per cent of Australian adults and 41 per cent of children are reliant on some kind of government welfare as indicators of the present sense of insecurity.

The social climate feeds attitudes of anti-immigration and domestic security.

"Wealthy Australians are becoming more neurotic about their security", Mackay said.

"People feel self-protective... people feel unsure, edgy. They are not quite sure what's happening to their society".



Attitudes can be changed

Mackay said that community attitudes be changed, though getting people to think and act differently is an enormous job.

“People hold their attitudes because of the way they behave”, said Mackay, adding that attitudes are the outcome of personal experience and argument simply reinforces existing attitudes. It is counter-productive.

Community change, Mackay said, is never due to attitudinal change. It is behavioural change that leads to attitudinal change. Evidence to support this proposition, Mackay said, comes from the campaign against drink driving.

It was intervention in the driving environment through the introduction of random breath testing which created the pressure for new driving behaviour and to an eventual attitude change to drink driving.

In a similar way the flooding of the market with Bankcard when the credit card system was introduced encouraged its use. It resulted in attitudinal change by skeptics after they had used the cards.

Attitudinal change and aid

The exposure necessary to changing attitudes to aid through having Australians experience global problems is not really available. This, said Mackay, makes necessary the utilisation of the reinforcement effect. This implies finding existing, positive community attitudes and reinforcing them.

Mackay identified two possibilities for positive reinforcement:

- ▶ the ‘fragile planet’ attitude
- ▶ the perception of falling short of our own ideals.

The fragile planet attitude

The notion of a fragile Earth implies the need for greater responsibility beyond our own economic development and comfort and of sharing the Earth.

Already exploited by the environment lobby, the attitude takes the long road and starts with children who are already familiar with it.

It is necessary to draw the link with the survival of people as well as the environment, Mackay said.

Falling short of our own ideals

This is a strong feeling among the baby boomer generation that takes the form of:

- ▶ a perception that they are not living up to their values
- ▶ disillusionment with intractable unemployment, welfare dependency, self-centredness and lack of compassion.

The sense that people are not living according to their preferred values could be exploited in the interests of overseas aid. Aid could come to be seen as a means for people to enact the convictions they are unable to enact locally.



Mackay's tips to achieve this include:

- ▶ supply people with a sense of purpose
- ▶ focus on behaviour
- ▶ do not focus on attitudes or make them explicit, although attitudes should be tapped into
- ▶ provide people with something tangible which could be seen as a good thing to do for a person or community — this could be the focus of a project
- ▶ be specific; the more material and tangible, the more the need is seen and the more appropriate the response; this will lead to attitudinal change and greater future generosity.

Community and philanthropy

Comments made by Mackay in response to questions:

- ▶ philanthropy is an outcome of becoming a community
- ▶ Australia may still be too immature to be a community
- ▶ we need to “...create spaces where people feel part of community” and to connect with people to develop a sense of community.

Turbulence is all the young know

Young people today know only a turbulent society and, consequently, recognise change as normal.

Their attitudes are more flexible than those of their parents and, especially, more flexible than those of their grandparents.

Young people want to keep their options open and avoid too much commitment. Their loyalty is shortlived.

Tips

- ▶ the fact that people focus on success stories provides opportunities to educate the public
- ▶ reinforce attitudes that go with positive behaviour to increase the probability that it will be repeated
- ▶ engage in public advocacy to explain what people get for their aid dollar.



Successful community campaigning

Rhonda Galbally, VicHealth...

Campaigns

In her work with VicHealth, Galbally has found community awareness campaigns do not work and fail to achieve behavioural change, although they may achieve something.

The model of knowledge leading to attitudinal change, which in turn leads to behavioural modification, is dysfunctional. The *information > education > communication* model fails to result in changes to behaviour.

Galbally said that having hope is a positive factor. The challenge is how to promote hopefulness when fearfulness and hopelessness are so prevalent.

"People are at risk because the situation is risky", said Galbally. "Aid is hope... it is taking control over their lives".

Government/NGO collaboration

**Harold Wilkinson,
Department of Health and Family Services...**

The main points of Wilkinson's presentation included:

- ▶ issues need to be defined and to be clear in the minds of the public
- ▶ involve a community target group and your partners
- ▶ do not lose sight of the big picture
- ▶ government and NGO collaboration on communication campaigns will involve some compromise by both groups
- ▶ collaboration will involve a commitment of resources, particularly by government.



Reviewing the surveys

Barry Elliott, Elliott and Shanahan Research...

Barry Elliott produced *A Review of Community Attitudes on Overseas Aid*.

He analysed ten population surveys and 15 constituent surveys commissioned by aid agencies dating back to 1972.

The context in which the surveys were carried out, Elliott said, was “...absolutely critical to the answers”. The phrasing of the questions affects the answers received.

Future surveys, Elliott, said, should utilise multivariate analysis.

Analysis

Elliott’s findings include:

- ▶ quantitative language is unfamiliar to the public
- ▶ the real issue of one of finding ways to tap beliefs about more or less aid
- ▶ there is a correlation of support for domestic welfare and spending on foreign aid; the same people donate to both
- ▶ people are aware of aid but know little about it
- ▶ there are considerable public doubts about the effectiveness of aid
- ▶ survey results disclose a degree of trust in NGOs in regard to the spending of public donations.

Targeting the aid message

Elliott identified a number of points relevant to targeting aid messages:

- ▶ surveys have produced confused results about which segments of the population should be targeted
- ▶ school children are fundamental to the future
- ▶ the 55+ age group are the least likely to donate to aid and are a growing portion of the population; NGOs may find it more difficult to raise funds and carry out development education
- ▶ indications exist of a relationship between education, occupation, income and support for aid, however it is not strong
- ▶ focus on people’s values to identify target groups.

The message

Elliott proposes the adoption of the positive messages identified in the 1996 UK publication, *A Case for Aid. A Manifesto*:

- ▶ aid works
- ▶ spend now, save later
- ▶ aid is a hand up, not a hand out
- ▶ aid is in everyone’s interest.



The needs of research

Further research aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the aid message would be of benefit to agencies.

Effective communication, Elliott says, depends upon an understanding of the point of view of our target audience. We need to identify who provides support, discover their positive positions and build on these.

Other observations

- ▶ information about the context in which people think about aid is needed
- ▶ there is a huge portion of the population in the middle of the support/do not support continuum that we can influence
- ▶ we need reliable measures to monitor the support for aid over time
- ▶ we need reliable measures for the benchmarking of attitudes to aid every four or five years.

Introducing people to the cultural artefacts of developing countries is another way to foster understanding and insight through having fun.

Brisbane's Northey Street City Farm has a number of musical instruments used by Pacific island peoples, such as this drum being demonstrated by Fiona Campbell from TERRACircle international development consultants (www.terracircle.org.au). The farm also provides visiting school groups with practical studies in a secondary development education subject.





What message are we communicating?

Mehr Khan, UNICEF

Ms Khan made a number of points:

- ▶ the term 'Third World' is now largely a misnomer
- ▶ there are now more people living in poverty than previously
- ▶ 1.3 billion live on less than US\$1 a day.

Poverty is increasing in the developed countries where the gap between rich and poor is widening and leading to conflict. The cost of ignoring poverty now will bring greater costs in future.

This is taking place at a time when we have all the knowledge we need to eradicate poverty.

Observations on aid:

- ▶ the UN recommends countries allocate 0.7 per cent of their GDP to overseas aid, yet the international aid budget is shrinking and is now smaller than it was 20 years ago; projections are for further decline
- ▶ an increasing amount of the overseas aid budget is being diverted from development into relief, refugees and into Eastern Europe
- ▶ taxpayers have become ambivalent about aid although they give verbal support based on humanitarian and moral motivation
- ▶ the lack of a strong donor aid constituency has reduced the pressure on governments to act on aid; they see little support for aid budgets.

These trends are abetted by perceptions held by the public:

- ▶ the aid allocation is poorly spent
- ▶ funds are siphoned off by corrupt officials and aid agencies
- ▶ there is little knowledge of where aid funds go

The public perception that aid spending is high combines with these factors to support reductions in government expenditure on overseas aid, with little opposition from the public.

Agencies themselves responsible

Mehr said that aid agencies themselves must accept some responsibility for reduced aid expenditure because of miscommunication about aid:

- ▶ there is a lack of a clear view of the achievements of aid
- ▶ estimates it as something like two per cent to four per cent of the population of the industrialised world
- ▶ politicians believe the constituency is small and aid can therefore be cut back without great risk of electoral damage.

A 1996 OECD report identified a lack of knowledge of the aid constituency among aid agencies and governments in aid donor countries.



Information and perceptions

Mehr says that television is the source of information about developing countries for most people. Secondary sources of information include other media and aid agencies, The agencies produce both good and bad work.

The reliance on television is problematic, says Mehr, as it is “...primarily a source of entertainment: and because of the focus of Western media on “...the eccentric, the negative”. Viewers know that, in their own countries, bad news is not the norm, yet they have no knowledge of lesser developed countries which they see as places of “...unmitigated disaster”.

It is bad news that leads to inaction and confusion. People lack understanding but not the willingness to act, yet the lack of understanding “...leads people to switch off”.

Mehr said that emotions are frequently targeted by aid agencies to raise funds, however a simple focus on human needs results is “...gross oversimplification”.

Needed - better communication

According to Mehr, we need to focus on better communication:

- ▶ take a long term perspective
- ▶ involve the communities concerned
- ▶ recognise that community participation is critical to success
- ▶ personal actions make a difference
- ▶ techniques used to promote consumer products will not work with development assistance because of the public’s unfamiliarity with the situation of people and communities in need of assistance
- ▶ a more interactive approach that establishes a dialogue is needed.

Mehr said that the school systems of most countries have failed in regard to aid due to underfunding and overload and because of content and learning factors. We could learn from Scandanavia and Holland where development education in schools has contributed to the public support for aid.

The media, Mehr said, are essential partners in development education and we must collaborate with them. We should be honest and talk about our mistakes and failures as well as our successes if we are to maintain credibility.

We need to ask ourselves:

- ▶ are the messages we put out clear?
- ▶ are they too simplistic?
- ▶ do they say that aid alone will not solve global problems, that aid should be integrated with international moves such as multilateral activities?



Organisations must work together

Warwick Olsen, Pilgrim International Communications...

Warwick Olsen has been responsible for emotionally charged television advertisements produced for fundraising purposes for World Vision Australia.

Defending emotional appeal

Olsen defends the use of emotional content in advertising for fundraising because it triggers a direct response from viewers. Emotional images portray human needs and donors respond to need, he said, explaining that his messages are needs-driven and focus on children.

It is necessary to stir emotion into communication to communicate and educate successfully. Olsen says that his promotions contain educational content although “... they are not educational in the conventional sense”.

“We depict need to gain attention”, said Olsen in acknowledging that some people consider his images simplistic.

Olsen explained that his media products shock the average person and generate emotionally-charged decisions that further information can develop for educational purposes.

Olsen blames government for leaving NGOs to go it alone on development education. He advocates government funding for the development education activity of NGOs because they face difficulty in doing it all themselves.

Action for better communication

Olsen suggests a number of actions to improve the communication of aid:

- ▶ communication starts with crisis such as Rwanda or Zaire; crisis is the time to act and is an opportunity for development education
- ▶ emotion and experience are necessary to development education
- ▶ giving a donation can be the start of a journey with an NGO towards further support and advocacy.



Refining the message

Fiona Douglas, Community Aid Abroad (CAA)...

Fiona Douglas commented on the use of emotional imagery in NGO media products. She explained that she had no problem with emotion but that: “We should use emotion such as the positive emotion of hope”.

Douglas wondered about the types of perceptions created in the community by the use of negative, stereotypical images. She suggested that such images are wearing thin and are producing declining results. People expect sophisticated answers.

“Are we ready as an industry to risk life outside the stereotyped image?”.

Aid and development organisations now work within a social context influenced by a reactive mentality - the “Pauline Hanson factor”, as she described it. “How have NGO communications contributed to these views?”, she asked.

Douglas said that aid agencies are tempted to talk only about good news, however they must tell the whole story, including the “warts”. We need increased accuracy in stories, Douglas asserted.

She reinforced Hugh Mackay’s statement that people are yearning for a sense of purpose and proposed that we offer hope as a means of achieving behavioural change.

Opinion about Africa oversimplified?

While in Africa in the days prior to the seminar, Douglas spoke with CAA Africa partners and asked them for their views on the way Africa was portrayed in aid media products.

Their comments included the observations that:

- ▶ the African situation is oversimplified; a false impression exists about the complexity of the problems and their solutions
- ▶ there is extensive use of images of children but the work is more complex
- ▶ NGOs may be selling Africa to pay their overhead costs.

Education and advocacy

Douglas said that there existed a need to discuss issues such as international debt and its impact.

She recognises that, in some agencies, there is a division between campaigners and marketers, between educators and fundraisers and that the development education material given out by educators was of greater complexity than that distributed by marketers. Development educators, Douglas said, need to have a greater understanding of where people are coming from.



Her suggestions for improved agency communication:

- ▶ people portrayed in aid media products want some input
- ▶ communications represent a challenge to NGO personnel with the move from a project to program focus
- ▶ it is easier to explain something practical
- ▶ explain simply but do not oversimplify
- ▶ use different language for different audiences.



Techniques used by international development workers — such as the Participatory Learning & Action (PLA) techniques used to produce this planting and harvest matrix — can be demonstrated to school students, adult education classes and community groups to train them in practical development skills and give an insight into the techniques used by development workers. Familiarity with development skills may increase support for NGOs.



Discussion

Questions and discussion followed the presentations.

Mehr Khan

- ▶ there is a need for dialogue with journalists to provide the context needed for stories
- ▶ a focus on emotional images and stories may, in the longer term, produce more harm than good
- ▶ "...people don't know how to put a negative image into context".

Warwick Olsen

- ▶ negative images are real life
- ▶ there is a need to link negative images with positive
- ▶ "I think NGOs are very bad at taking people on long term journeys; some of them are better than others"
- ▶ "I don't think we lie; I think we take part of the message"
- ▶ "I believe NGOs will be more successful at communicating than the government".

Janet Hunt

- ▶ "We have to start talking to the welfare sector in Australia and get our story together on social expenditure and aid as part of welfare expenditure"
- ▶ "We have to get a lot more sophisticated in our messages. I don't see that coming through in how we do things at the moment".



Workshops

Building the constituency

The constituency of aid and development include:

- ▶ donors
- ▶ members of organisations
- ▶ the media
- ▶ teachers and, through them, students
- ▶ politicians
- ▶ business
- ▶ non-donor supporters
- ▶ churches.

Behavioural change desired of constituents:

- ▶ increased voluntarism
- ▶ campaigning for increased social expenditure
- ▶ encouragement of debate on issues
- ▶ change in personal lifestyle and the building of community
- ▶ an ethic of global citizenship
- ▶ ethical consumption
- ▶ financial support for agencies
- ▶ support for an end to the erosion of aid funds.

Experiencing linkages

Linkages with other projects:

- ▶ globalisation — action on commonalities due to globalisation
- ▶ encouragement of politicians to visit projects
- ▶ local community involvement in projects > needs commonality for connection
> must be more than an abstract idea
- ▶ community linkages > sister communities/villages > reinforces local connections
- ▶ study tours
- ▶ visits by developing country people to Australia
- ▶ activities that reinforce the idea that change is possible
- ▶ NGO-NGO links in developed countries.



Discussion on defending and increasing overseas development assistance

In producing development education and associated media products:

- ▶ focus on elements other than money, such as achievement
- ▶ point out that today's trading partners were Australia's aid recipients 20 years ago
- ▶ identify what has not been tried
- ▶ gain ministerial support for activities
- ▶ focus on what AusAID does
- ▶ focus on the quality of the aid budget
- ▶ produce arguments in tune with the government's stated priorities
- ▶ produce a manifesto on positive aid
- ▶ change argument away from altruism towards Australia's national interest (this might be a challenge for NGOs)
- ▶ invest in our children's future
- ▶ set up electorate targets — MPs visit projects
- ▶ the valuation of aid by recipients.

Research workshop

Report back from the Research workshop:

- ▶ keep doing research
- ▶ involve aid agencies in research through ACFOA.



Use of an A-frame level for planting along the contour of sloping land is another development technique that could be used to familiarise Australians with development work. Familiarisation with such skills allows broader issues to do with international development to be introduced.



Recommendations

- ▶ ACFOA set up a research committee
- ▶ categorise questions that all agencies would be interested in
- ▶ carry out exploratory research to test whether the question interests all and consult with agencies
- ▶ agencies to consider contributing funds
- ▶ AusAID to consider contributing funds
- ▶ carry out the annual tracking of public opinion on aid.

Comment

AusAID indicated that it would be prepared to seed the process but ACFOA would have to contribute financially later.

Agencies carrying out their own research should collaborate.

The way forward is by AusAID- ACFOA collaboration.

Janet Hunt

- ▶ the media thrives on conflict and accentuates differences rather than commonalities
- ▶ we need to talk about how we deal with media coverage.

Phillip Hazelton

(APHEDA - Australian People for Health and Education)

- ▶ we should identify and jointly tackle a common enemy
- ▶ we should not pander to media reporting
- ▶ the government has reduced the overseas aid budget and nobody cares
- ▶ NGOs need a forum to reform the agenda and for AusAID to join in dialogue with NGOs.

What end result do we want for overseas aid?

AusAID

People in AusAID cannot engage in fully open dialogue due to the organisation's relationship with the government.



Effective communication depends upon an understanding of the point of view of our target audience. We need to identify who provides support, discover their positive positions and build on these.

...Barry Elliot, Elliot and Shanahan Research

